

*Some call them dungeons. Most call them Towers. I even knew someone how liked saying the words “pan-dimensional spiritual genius loci” for the sake of accuracy. The name matters less than what they are, and what they are is one of the few ways most people who aren’t us can cross between different worlds.*

*Now, since a lot of us got snatched by a System or some kind of equally powerful divine entity, you might have missed the experience of crossing between worlds the “long way around.” The good news is that—as long as we’re not talking about the Sourcery behind how it works—the general concept isn’t complicated.*

*As you may or may not already know, “space” doesn’t work like quite the way it does back home in the Fathoms. If you thought the cold expanse of the void was hostile back on [CENSORSHIP GEAS], then you haven’t seen someone die from Source Corruption. You ever watch someone partially unravel from existence? Just... come apart until their component aspects are merged with their surrounding reality?*

*Yeah. Not super great. You can still hear them screaming if you got a Psionic Class or something like that from whatever System decided to bless you.*

*Now before you start having nightmares, don’t worry: we’re Trespassers. We’re immune to Source Corruption since we’re technically soulless horrors to begin with. I mean, we won’t get unraveled or anything. We’ll just lose your Class or whatever we got transplanted in that open spot we have for Spirits, and then drown or go insane drifting in that vast sea of oscillating monochrome, perfectly preserved for the rest of eternity...*

*Anyway. Why am I telling you this? Because traversing the Fathoms above is pure hell, and most civilizations here aren’t capable of creating even a single Sourceship.*

*-The Trespasser’s Compendium*

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The Tower

Wei’s meditative trance broke as he struck the ground. The wind was driven from his lungs in a startling instant, gravity pounding his chest hard with a staggering blow. A series of cracks sang out from Wei’s torso as sharp pain began to spread. Things were definitely fractured—maybe even broken.

But the pain told him he was still alive. And if he was still alive, then he could keep fighting.

As his senses returned to his flesh, the world was awash with chaotic notice. He tumbled across the ground, cracking the obsidian surface and carrying flecks in his wake. Something *splashed* apart as he barreled into them; what felt like ragged fur peeled apart against his face.

Fighting to regain his bearings, he clawed out with his hands, digits greeting air twice before he finally speared them into the broken earth. Rough stone shattered before his desperate thrusts, and Wei felt himself slow at once. A jolt of pain tore at his joints, but he knew they were strained at most when he bent them to deep his grip.

His arms dug furrows in the ground as he righted his fall into a grinding drag. Two more *things* splattered against him—demons, Wei guessed, judging by the foulness of the ichor.

As he finally strained to an agonizing halt, Wei's lower body flopped down as he groaned — battled to get his bearings. Tearing his hands from where they were buried, he rolled over.

And promptly found himself staring up five Horsemen, their ghostly arrows already mid-materialization.

An exasperated chuckle forced its way out of his throat. The heavens weren't just blind today: they were drenching him with their piss.

**Source: [8.11/15] Liters**

**Body Advancement: 13%**

**>FORTITUDE Lv. 8: 33%**

Slamming his heel into the ground, Wei kicked himself into a backward roll just as the Horsemen loosed their ethereal arrows. Judging from how fast their arrows were during his escape, he expected to get pieced more than a few times—kept his arms in front of his vitals to reduce the harm.

Two things surprised him thereafter. The first was how he somehow felt *stronger* by a whole magnitude despite his painful landing; the second was how he felt faster as well, his body snapping into motion with an instantaneity he lacked before.

But it wasn't just that. As he moved, a faint aura around him shivered, enwreathing him in a dim corona of monochrome as glowing arrows hissed free from bows. Instead of blurring fast across the scant distant and riddling him, the shots were reduced to half their previous velocity. It didn't two from skipping off his right thigh and one sinking its tip into his hip, but as a whole, they were slower than he recalled.

Far slower.

**Body Advancement: 15%**

**>Celerity Lv. 7: 8%**

**Mastery**

**>Evasion [I]: Hostiles will have their reaction speed and movement speed diminished by an amount equal to the host's (Celerity). Can only affect foes within range of host's aura [1 Meter], and will result in an attribute clash if a hostile has a conflicting mastery.**

Wei landed on his feet like a carp trailing through water. Comparatively, the horseman lurched as they moved, as if hounds pawing across water. He seized the presented opportunity, tore the arrow embedded in his hip, and fell upon them.

The rightmost Horseman was the first to fall. Wei plunged through its side with a whipping kick—and then bounced to maintain his balance, not expecting to sheer the demon in half with a single strike. Tearing out through the other side of the demon, he shifted his unexpected momentum, turning as he poured both motion and force into his other leg. Another Horseman fell—this one hewed clean from the torso up. Kaleidoscopic ichor coated Wei's eyes, but he could still sense the others with perfect clarity, felt them turning their bows on him finally.

Three shot shrieked out. Wei shot low and slipped past. He rose with a rising fist as his fist came flowing upward. The Drowned Sky Sect knew speed and force to be intertwined, and understood fluidity to be the essence of striking, while balance and control stood the pillars of grappling. Adapting to his newfound strength, he sailed through the remaining Horsemen, charting his path past their attacks, through their demonic flesh, into the next foe.

He swept through them in but a second, as if carried on a whirlwind, and when Wei finally came to a halt, he felt his mind staggered by the feat he just performed. Behind him, five demonic corpses lay splattered around the crater he left. Demonic essence leaked from broken bodies, seeped and blended with the exposed veins lining the earth.

**Body Advancement: 31%**

**>Might Lv. 8: 16%**

**Mastery**

**>Unarmed Combat: 94%**

What was this? How did he just do that? The feat he performed was beyond his capabilities by far—by another stage of cultivation. Mere minutes ago, he could barely dodge their arrows. Now—

A wave of presences flooded his awareness. There were fifty demons this time, slowly closing in from all sides. Fifty, and increasingly exponentially by the second. They approached from every corner, every angle. With the Incubators extracted, he stood exposed across a vast plane of obsidian and ash. The only living human amidst a sea of demons.

They greeted him as monstrosities of all shapes and aesthetics. Some among them resembled mishappen parodies of the human form. Others were more animalistic, or a mix between the bestial and something of another nature. And then there were those he couldn't quite classify.

One such entity came stood a giant among the horde, rising to be well over fifty meters tall. Its face was a sack of flayed flesh carved with three holes to resemble a human smile, but from its body dangled demonic hooks upon which a few thousand sacks of gold sprinkled their coins. Slowly, Wei watched it inflate like a kite as it rose into the air, bringing a rain of golden while more curved tentacles sprouted from its underside.

### **Skin-Trader Lv. 25**

#### **Recommendation: Run.**

Wei heeded his madness without protest and did exactly that. Tearing off into a sprint, his mind slipped away from his sudden spike in power to the structure looming just in the near distance.

The tower rose high, slipping beyond the weave of storms, and its walls hinted at possible security to Wei. More green-hued eyes glared at him, burned with unnatural power, but they did not try to assail his mind this time. Instead, they seemed content just to watch.

As he accelerated across the land, Wei kept his focus honed—prepared himself to evade or fight past any demons that got in his path. To his surprise—and mounting confusion—they were all standing still, holding their positions as hunters changed to spectators.

An ill feeling rose within his gut, but he pushed it aside. He would have time to... *process* all that happened to him later if he survived. Right now, he focused on fleeing.

#### **They are observing you.**

The voice in his mind whispered to him as he sprinted, and he shivered with each character it spoke. Its monotone sounded in his mind with perfect clarity, and though he understood little about all the words it kept searing into his mind, could read the contents without issue. As he glanced at the demons in the distance, he found the voice's words to be correct: they were watching him, studying him with a particular glint in their eyes.

Where they seemed hollow shells of violence and hunger before, there was a growing intelligence filling their postures, stares, and expressions. Wei fought the urge to follow as a lump of coldness formed in his throat. Before he was a fox fleeing hunters, now he was but an ape dancing on a board of gods, ignorant to all that was truly happening.

#### **Unable to locate host's precise location**

#### **Attempting to access additional information**

**[RESTRICTED]: Host has not met the necessary requirements to survive the transference of information.**

The more the voice spoke, the less he thought it simple madness. It didn't sound like him for one, and even if he couldn't comprehend what it was fully saying, it wasn't incoherent either. He guessed that it might be an awakened spirit. A benevolent entity that saved him when he was lost in the chaos. His heart sang at the thought of being favored, but whatever joy in him soured as the flashes of his near past returned.

His mother's severed head flooded into his mind. His mother. And his father standing over her body, invisible essence-shaped blade coated with her blood.

A sickness boiled in Wei. He staggered a step as his body threatened to wretch. *No! Don't think of that now. Focus. Focus on the present. Mask the past. Mask the past. Mask the past.*

Bending his mind to obedience, he pulled himself away from horror-laced memories continued onward.

**Severe trauma detected in host.**

**It is recommended that you see mental treatment as soon as possible.**

Wei scoffed bitterly at that. A useful recommendation; perhaps he could stop and ask the gathered demons if one of them was potentially a hidden elder who mastered spiritual arts relating to the heart.

**Probability low.**

He thought so too.

Seconds extended into minutes as Wei recentered his mind. The rhythmic taps of his cloth shoes—now almost entirely shredded—and the flapping tassels of his robes—almost entirely torn—aided his focus. As he sank deeper into his focus, he felt a meditative trance come over him even as his eyes remained open.

The world expanded around him once more, all the voluminous spiritual essences painting this reality washing over him as if oil on water. As he drew closer to the tower, his mind slackened, melding with existence, supping nourishment from the growing oneness.

**Restoring Source...**

**>[8.77/15] Liters**

**>[9.43/15] Liters**

The pain dotting his back and hip vanished. And also broke his trance. Wei blinked as he felt at his wounds. His back still ached, but his hip was completely mended. Not even a nick remained where the arrow bit into him. No hint of a scar, either. A faint sense of awe was beginning to grow in him.

*Exalted spirit, is this your doing?*

**By technicality dictated through System Symbiosis, it is yours. As stated before, your Body and Spirit have been adapted to help you survive Source Corruption. You are now Soulforged.**

*I do not understand. How is this happening? What are you if not a spirit?*

**You have been imbued with a System.**

*System?*

**Yes.**

*A System for what?*

**For adapting to the rules of any realm of reality so that the enforcement of order may be meted out at the discretion of the host, or in extreme circumstances, so that a disorderly realm may be purified. We are System designation Keter. We are the unshaped that comes before. We are judgment in waiting. We are consequence beyond causality.**

Wei's mind reeled with each word the voice spoke. He understood that it was joined to him to some extreme extent. That explained the monochrome flowing into his **Nascent Spirit**. But there was still too much context lacking for him to fully conceive what dwelled inside him. It was a judge of some kind—an enforcer for a sect ruling a higher realm, perhaps. He didn't know what this "Keter" meant in specificity, but it was clearly a title of considerable note considering the boasts that followed.

**No boast has been delivered. We are simply reciting the exact specifications behind our initial creation. We are fortunate to have encountered each other, host. By the time of this System's dormancy, the odds of our successful transplantation into a functional and sufficiently advanced were estimated at an infinitesimally small value.**

With each exchange, Wei's mind crawled with more questions. Yet, though there was much he wanted to inquire from the System that now dwelled within him, the looming battlements of obsidian and lacquered with bronze and gold captured Wei's attention—as well as the tower that rose beyond the sky.

The location that sprawled out before him was far wider than any city Wei had ever beheld. Even the Drowned Sky's mountain sanctuary occupied but a tenth of its width. Searing eyes hovered in the air, observing Wei with their unblinking stares. Though they didn't attack his mind this time, he could still feel a pressure pushing against his thoughts, making it hard for him to focus—to even think.

And then was the whirlwind of churning shades. Thousands—perhaps even more—ink-black shapes drifted around the fortress’s perimeter, their forms similar to the Specter he faced earlier, if even more incorporeal.

And then there was the tower itself. The tower, which bore a strange design, its outsides held up by four immense pillars of obsidian. On the surface of these columns shone the gleam of metal, depicting armored figures struggling against the demons, slaying them, cutting pieces away from them, and even *feasting* from them. Lining the four faces of the structure were color pieces of glass that portrayed rows of men being stitched into the vivisectioned bodies of demons.

Each image Wei gleaned filled him with a growing sense of unease. Suddenly, the ringed walls of the fortress groaned as the ground shifted. The eyes closed, and as the battlements turned, watchtowers shaped in semblance to furred fangs sliding across the sky like the fins of a shark, Wei found himself greeted by two massive gates colored a sight-searing white.

When the sound of grinding earth came to the end and the fortress finally stopped moving, Wei found himself waiting awkwardly in the barren plain. A few seconds more passed before the tension grew to uncomfortable heights. They knew he was there, but they made no attempt to greet him. Nor could he see anyone on the walls—no signs of humanity or otherwise gazing down from the heights.

“I bid you greetings,” he said, trying to keep the desperation out of his voice as he brought fist and palm together. Perhaps they were waiting for him to make himself known. “I am Young Master Wei An Wei, of the Drowned Sky Sect. I come—I—I am lost. I humbly request you open your gates and render aid. I vow to abide by the sacred laws of hospitality, and may you blind my eyes, take my limbs, and cripple my cultivation should I break them.”

For a few seconds, he heard nothing. Nothing but the whistling of the winds. Nothing but the faint crash of distant thunder. Then he heard it. From behind the walls, from high above, he heard peals of mirthful chuckles descending, growing louder and louder until it was as if a legion of voices all lost in the same joy.

He hesitated. He didn’t know how to respond—not even what the laughing was about.

“***Do it again.***” Wei spun, snapping to a fighting stance as the voice brushed past the nape of his neck. There was a presence behind him. He felt it. He felt it with more clarity than—As he turned, as he swept his surroundings, he clenched his teeth and narrowed his gaze. Nothing. There was nothing—

“***Do the thing again. The way your people express gratitude. The fist and the palm. Do it again. Say the words, too. The same ones you used before.***”

The voice that spoke to him came from all around, sounding low, thin, and layered—like the same person speaking slightly out of sync with themselves.

After a heartbeat, Wei collected his wits and did just that. “I bid you greetings. I am Young Master Wei An Wei, of the Drowned Sky Sect. I am lost. I humbly request you open your gates and render aid. I vow to abide by the sacred laws of hospitality, and may you blind my eyes, take my limbs, and cripple my cultivation should I break them.”

Another bout of laughter immediately followed. **“Oh, delightful. It’s been so long since I’ve been properly greeted by one of your kind. A cultivator. Well. Properly is doing a lot of heavy lifting for me right now: there’s another of your like in the Tower-City just before you. Come to think of it, he quite looks like you too. Perhaps a decade older...”**

And then Wei found it impossible to breath. The flashes of his past returned. His mother’s head. His father’s sword. The blood. Her body. The attempt at tribulation...

The man was alive. The *bastard* was alive. Red seeped into the corners of Wei’s vision as unvented rage roared back to life.

The unseen figure continued speaking, ignorant of uncaring of Wei’s ire. **“He wasn’t nearly as polite as you. But then again, he didn’t need to be. And I suppose I shouldn’t regard him as an actual cultivator at all, considering his actual nature.”**

It took all Wei had to preserve his decorum. If this was the Ascended Elder of this city, he needed their favor to enter. He didn’t fancy his chances against such a foe regardless of the System—whatever it was—that was now joined to him, so he needed to act wisely.

Wisely. Like his mother told him to so many times. **“Find what they want, Wei. Find what they want, and use it.”**

“I apologize on my kin’s behalf,” Wei said, almost stumbling over his words. “If he has offended you, Ascended Elder, I would gladly offer my valor on your behalf and make right this impropriety.”

More laughter. Wei pressed his fist even deeper into his palm to stop the shaking.

**“Christ. You are absolutely precious. Just a delight. Polite, disciplined, and if I’m not mistaken, you might just be leaking Source Corruption as well, huh?”** The Ascended Elder let out a satisfied breath. **“Well. I guess my heart’s been bought. Come in, boy. Come in! Make your self at home—if you can, of course! Oh, and you might want to hurry. Your father is almost at the tower; he’ll be going up through the Moongates with the next group of slayers, sinners, and lambs at any moment. Maybe you can still catch him if you run.”**



None of the elder's words meant anything to Wei besides the last two sentences. He was already in motion as the gate began inward. As a gap formed, he charged, accelerating to his maximum speed as he entered the threshold.

And immediately found himself treading air, gravity seizing his guts for the second time that day. As he descended into a sudden fall, Wei looked downward, and felt his heart catch at the sight of a crumbling world.